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## Indian Views of the Custer Fight: A Source Book (review)

Cary C. Collins

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

**Reviewed by:**

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*Cary C. Collins*

*Indian Views of the Custer Fight: A Source Book.* By Richard G. Hardorff. Norman:

The Battle of the Little Bighorn occupies a prominent space in the pantheon of American historical events, a truly iconic moment that has been seared into the nation's collective memory. Fortunately, and in no small measure due to the tireless efforts of Richard Hardorff, our knowledge of those ever-most extraordinary thirty-some minutes has been deeply enriched. *Indian Views of the Custer Fight* is the last of three volumes of Native American participant interviews and reminiscences that Hardorff has published over the past fifteen years. This final edition includes thirty-five Lakota and Cheyenne eyewitness accounts of what transpired on that scorching summer day in 1876, the earliest observations recorded just five weeks, and the latest a distant sixty years, after the battle. The appearance of Hardorff's trilogy is timely, coinciding with the evolving trend in the writing of Indian and white relations that seeks to give voice to Native peoples and produce histories that include Indian perspectives and points of view.

*Indian Views of the Custer Fight* is an invaluable treasure of anecdotes, recollections, opinions, assessments, and interpretations. Because each of the informants experienced the Little Bighorn differently and could only report on what they had seen or heard, the testimonials at times provide conflicting depictions of the battle and its participants. That does not detract from the book, but is an unavoidable consequence of working with a large number of oral sources. An interesting example of this are the various perceptions presented of General George Armstrong Custer. To the Oglala warrior Low Dog, "No white man or Indian ever fought as bravely" (p. 66), while the Hunkpapa Crow King contended that if Major Marcus A. Reno's command had engaged the enemy as valiantly as he believed Custer's had, the whites "would have whipped the Indians" (p. 70). But those assessments were not held by all. The Southern Cheyenne, Brave Bear, questioned Custer's courage, asserting that although the "whites don't like [to] hear that Custer did not act brave in this battle," the "Indians here all think he acted cowardly" (p. 86). And Red

Feather, an Oglala, had this to say: "We always thought Custer was either crazy or drunk to attack us without knowing more about our camp. . . . He would have been brave to fight the way he did if we had attacked him, but I don't know what to call it the way they attacked us" (p. 118). Similar discrepancies occur in regard to the mutilation of soldiers' bodies, the identity of Custer's killer and the identification of the general's body, suicide by troopers, the number of Indian casualties, the length of time it took to fight the battle, and the average age of its Indian participants.

This collection of indispensable first-person testimony should be considered a basic source for anyone seeking to understand what happened on the slopes of the Little Bighorn in 1876.

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*Maple Valley, Washington*

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*Indian Views of the Custer Fight: A Source Book.* By Richard G. Hardorff. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. ISBN 0-8061-3690-1. Maps. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 237. \$14.95.

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